We must protect wild salmon from climate change; Droughts are only going to get worse, Aaron Hill writes

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Byline: Aaron Hill, Vancouver Sun

Body

Global warming is punching us in the face.

The vicious, record-smashing "heat dome" of late June killed hundreds of vulnerable British Columbians and hundreds of millions of shoreline animals. The mega-drought that's gripping much of western North America is bringing yet another harsh summer of wildfires and water shortages. The drought conditions are particularly hard on wild salmon, which wildlife, First Nations and many others in B.C. depend on. Our governments can and should be doing more to help our salmon through these hard times.

The natural systems that keep our rivers healthy are unravelling as human-caused climate change makes our summers hotter and drier. Our glaciers are shrinking and winter snowpacks are melting earlier. Summer water levels in our rivers are getting lower and becoming lethally hot for salmon. In winter and spring, our rivers are flooding more violently and more often, due to intense rainfall and sudden snow melts.

The flooding and drought are made worse by the loss of forest cover due to rampant clearcut logging, wildfires, and the climate-fuelled mountain pine beetle epidemic that has killed vast swaths of B.C.'s forests.

Many people think of B.C. as having plenty of fresh water. But across the province, communities are experiencing water shortages due to population growth, climate change, and poor water management. In fact, more than 60 per cent of British Columbians live in waterstressed areas.

Thirty-two populations of chinook, sockeye and steelhead are now listed as "endangered" or "threatened" by the federal Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada, with many more to join the list as more populations are assessed. Many of these endangered salmon swim home to water-stressed parts of the province such as the Thompson River and its tributaries, and the east coast of Vancouver Island, where over-extraction and scarcity of water is a serious problem.

Besides reducing our greenhouse gas emissions to minimize further warming, we have to defend wild salmon and the waters they swim in from the effects of climate change. The provincial and federal governments have recently announced funding for salmon habitat restoration and other measures. Kudos for that, but here's what else they need to do.

The provincial government has to get on with implementing the 2016 Water Sustainability Act. While this much-improved version of B.C.'s water law was very welcome when passed five years ago, very few of its provisions have been put into effect. For example, the province originally committed to licensing and regulating groundwater use under the act by 2019. That deadline then got pushed to 2022, and they're now on track to miss it a second time.

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Over-extraction and shortage of groundwater has serious effects on water flows in salmon streams, so properly managing our collective groundwater use will help keep salmon alive during hot weather.

The Water Sustainability Act also made it possible to create local "water sustainability plans" that can be used to address conflicts over water use, land-use decisions that affect water, and ecosystem restoration. When led by First Nations and other local people who know their lands and waters best, these plans can guide communities through the tough decisions needed to survive withering drought, and set a blueprint for managing the land to ensure healthy waters. Despite inspiring examples like those in the Cowichan and Nicola watersheds, government support for such planning has been piecemeal and underfunded. The Watershed Security Fund promised in last year's election could help kickstart water sustainability planning, but it has yet to materialize.

From the federal government, we need action on developing recovery plans for endangered salmon populations, as required under the federal Fisheries Act as of 2019. Among other things, these overdue recovery plans could help kickstart better water management for salmon during drought. Federal support for B.C.'s Healthy Watersheds Initiative would also be helpful.

The provincial and federal governments'piecemeal, often haphazard, approaches to water and land management are rapidly limiting our options for helping wild salmon survive the ravages of climate change. We know what's coming: the droughts are going to get worse and more frequent. We have the tools to better defend our fish and watersheds and we need to plan ahead and use them. Aaron Hill is executive director of Watershed Watch Salmon Society. !@COPYRIGHT=© 2021 Postmedia Network Inc. All rights reserved.

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